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Beowulf and Celtic Under-Water Adventure

by MARTIN PUHVEL

OF the many seemingly miraculous elements in *Beowulf*, hardly any appears as startling, even to a reader reasonably well versed in epic and mythic tradition, as *Beowulf's* lengthy submersion in the mere of Grendel's Mother. Dragons are common in folklore and myth; so are warlocks and man-eating monsters. Even *Beowulf's* distance-swimming feats, while at first glance stretching credibility, need not necessarily seem more than heroic exaggeration, especially in the light of the feats of marathon swimmers of this century. *Beowulf's* fantastic strength of arm — while plausibly explained by the influence of the legend of the Bear's Son — can, on first reading, be placed in the same category. Yet the dive to the bottom of the mere, lasting, statedly, a large part of the day,¹ seems fantastic enough for one to look for the influence of some body of myth where the barrier between the worlds above and under the wave tends to weaken or vanish. This quest is rendered all the more logical by a comparison with the corresponding element, in the Icelandic saga, of Grettir's descent into the cave of the giants behind the waterfall — a feat (at least in theory) entirely plausible for a bold and powerful swimmer.

The myth of the Bear's Son,² which seems to explain a number of puzzles in *Beowulf*, fails to yield a satisfactory basis for *Beowulf's* feat.³ Only exceptionally does the hero here dive through water — a well. And almost invariably an explanation is given; water parts around him, forming an air pocket, or a magic sponge soaks it up,

¹ *Beowulf's* adventure obviously lasts from fairly early in the morning till late afternoon; it is told that the Danes leave the mere after *non dæges* (1.1600) — 3 p.m.

² The manifestations of this myth have been thoroughly investigated by Friedrich Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte*, I. *Beowulf*. Munich, 1910.

³ Normally the hero descends into the monster's subterranean lair. While *Beowulf's* feat may conceivably have been originally inspired by this adventure of the Bear's Son, we must, I think, look for at least the formative influence of some other tradition.

or he travels down through it in a chest. In only one version — and that an Indian one — does the hero plunge into the sea; here, as always, he is tied to a rope.

James Carney, in arguing for Celtic influence as accounting for Beowulf's lengthy submersion, cites instances of Irish heroes' adventures under water:

Diarmaid O Duibhne dives into a well and comes to the territory ruled by the *Gruagach* ('Ruler') of the Land under Water (*Tir fo Thuinn*). In some poems which I have edited there are two references to a similar concept. The first reference is found in a praise poem addressed to Fearghal O'Reilly, probably the Fearghal who died in 1293. The poet praising O'Reilly in allegorical terms says: 'When the descendant of Cathal (Fearghal O'Reilly) was voyaging in the ocean he came to an otherworld palace (*siothbrugh*); the man of Cuan Clochair (Fearghal) recognized his ancestral treasures in a giant's cave. O Duibhne (Diarmaid O Duibhne), as a stout champion, went under the wave until he got the rings; likewise this bright blossom of Galway (Fearghal) leapt under the lake at his opponent.' In a praise poem to Pilib son of Aodh Conallach O'Reilly, written shortly before 1596, the poet, also praising his subject in allegorical terms, says: 'Though the heir of our Aodh (Pilib) found hardship in the danger of the well-known struggle with it, he took a fierce venomous monster from the vegetation at the bottom of a deep stream. His spirits rise on seeing the monster inhabitant of the cold stream; its dwelling and treasures (literally 'the place of its goblets') are now in this stout hand, a monster caught by a hand that is stronger.'⁴

Carney comments as follows:

It is apparent that in Irish material when one wishes to gain access to the underwater home of a monster, one simply dives in and somehow — it is never quite explained — one moves freely in the world beneath the water.⁵

I think that, while the survival admittedly cannot be explained in physiological terms, the origin of this motif lies in the folklore of the supernatural, to be specific, in the concept of the otherworld under the waves. This Celtic tradition, which may quite possibly be related to the Greek Atlantis myth, conceives of a wondrous country under the sea, an enchanted land sunk in remote times and still held under spell. It is often called *Tir-fo-thuinn* 'the Land

⁴ James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, Dublin, 1955, 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

beneath the Wave.' According to some traditions it appears over the water once every seven years, on the verge of the sea, and would be freed from the spell and remain over water if somebody succeeded in throwing fire on it. The tradition in its purity is glimpsed in *The Voyage of Maoldun*, where, after leaving the 'chrystal sea,' the voyagers see 'beneath the clear water a beautiful country, with many mansions surrounded by groves and woods'.⁶ In the original tradition this land was out of bounds to mortals, but it became subsequently accessible to some heroes through, it seems, the influence of the concept of the faeryland beyond the sea. I may in this connection quote A. C. L. Brown:

The Land beyond the Waves, where the faery folk are represented as dwelling, was no doubt confused with the Land beneath the Waves, just as Zimmer has shown that the Faeries of the *sid* and the Faeries of the Land beyond the Waves are never kept separate. . . . That the Celtic Other World was early confused with the Land beneath the Waves is clear from the tale of Loegaire mac Crimthann in the Book of Leinster.⁷

The story⁸ mentioned by Brown tells how Loegaire helps Fiachna, a faery ruler, recover his wife, who has been abducted. He and his men dive into a loch and find underneath it a wondrous land, where they enjoy the love of Fiachna's daughter and fifty other women for a year.

Another legend featuring the subaquatic faeryland is that of *Gillie of the Ferule*, which can be summarized as follows:

A mysterious stranger appears and presents the hero Murough with a brace of hounds sent by the Queen of Pride. He then disappears 'like the mist of a winter fog or the whiff of a March wind'.

The next day Murough goes hunting with the strange hounds, and is led by them to a particular spot where he meets an old fellow in a black shirt, who asks to be taken into his service. Murough agrees to hire him and to give him in wages whatever single request he shall ask at the end of the year. The year past, he asks for a ferule to fit his stick. The only suitable ferule turns out to be at the bottom of a lake. The upshot of the matter is that Murough is obliged to dive through the lake into the land

¹ See W. P. Joyce, trans., *Old Celtic Romances*, London, 1894, 147.

⁷ A. C. L. Brown, 'Iwain', *Harvard University Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, VIII, 41 n.

⁸ Standish O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, II, 290-1.

below it. There he finds that the King of the Land under the Wave has been robbed of all his possessions by a giant and that the latter is to come that very evening to carry off the king's daughter. Murough slays the giant and rescues the daughter. He is then escorted to the palace of the King, where he finds his Gillie of the Ferule sitting as the King on a golden throne. After spending what seems to be several days in continual feasting, Murough thinks of returning. When he reaches Ireland, he finds that he has been absent a year and a day.⁹

In *The Wooing of Emer* Cuchulain tells his charioteer a story featuring the under-water motif:

There was a famous king of Erin, Ruad, son of Rigdond, of Munster. He had an appointment of meeting with foreigners (*Goill*, i.e., probably Norsemen). He went to the meeting round the south of Alba (Great Britain) with three ships. There were thirty men in each ship. The fleet was arrested from below in the midst of the sea. Throwing jewels and precious things into the sea did not get them off. Lots were cast among them to decide who should go into the sea and find out what it was that held them fast. The lot fell upon the king himself. He jumped into the sea and the waves at once closed over him. He lighted upon a large plain on which nine beautiful women met him. They confessed that it had been they that had arrested the ships, in order that he should come down to them. And they gave him nine vessels of gold to sleep with them for nine nights, one night with each of them. He did so. . . . Then he joined his men, and they went on with their voyage.¹⁰

In Celtic myth the subaquatic faeryland is not always reached through the sea, or even a lake. In the story of *The Pursuit of the Gilla Dacaire* as well as the Arthurian romance of *Yvain* by Chretien de Troyes it is reached by descent down a well. There is no doubt that these legends belong to one and the same general tradition; the size of the body of water has no absolute significance in Celtic myth — as the Otherworld can flourish behind the ocean, so can it behind smaller bodies of water (e.g., a stream, as in the Breton lays of *Lanval* and *Graelent* and in the story, in Chretien's *Lancelot*, of the rescue of Guenevere from 'the land from which no man returns'); the same formula obviously holds true for the subaquatic

⁹ *Giolla on Fhiughha*, edited, with a translation, by Douglas Hyde, for The Irish Texts Society, London, 1899, under the title of *The Lad of the Ferule*.

¹⁰ *The Wooing of Emer*, trans. by Kuno Meyer, *The Archaeological Review*, I, March 1888, 155.

faeryland. The story of *The Pursuit of the Gilla Dacaire* can be summarized as follows:

A *Fomor*¹¹ appears among Finn Ban Mac Bresal and his men with a monstrous horse. Conan Mail and fourteen others attempt to ride it and it disappears across the sea with the men, who seem fastened to its back. Their lord and comrades search for them overseas and reach a cliff which Diarmaid O'Duibhne alone manages to scale with the help of the magic staves of Manannan, his faeryland teacher. He comes to a well, drinks of its waters, whereupon a wizard appears, fights with him and then vanishes into the well. This is repeated on several consecutive days; at last Diarmaid clasps him in his arms and they leap down the well together. He finds himself in a spacious country, where he engages in victorious battles with mighty hosts. He finally helps one of the faeryland potentates slay the latter's enemy, the wizard, who turns out to be king of the country. The fifteen men of Finn are freed from their faeryland captivity.¹²

I believe it likely that this story, as well as that of *Yvain*, represents a later development as far as the descent into the faery realm is concerned. Not only is in these the descent — down a well, a miniature body of water — certain to be a secondary development from the sea-motif,¹³ just as is the motif of the river-bounded faeryland from that of the Otherworld behind the sea, but the descent is not obviously aided and inspired by the faery folk — and it is in the nature of faery romance at its purest that nobody 'crashes' faeryland without the help or at least consent of its sojourners. In the *Pursuit* there may yet be a hint of faery instrumentality; the chain of events is started by a Fomor who turns out to be a *Dedannan*¹⁴ in magic disguise.¹⁵ No hint of this kind of instrumentality is to be found in *Yvain* or in the Irish tale

¹¹ The Fomors or Fomorians of Irish history were a breed reputed to be sea-robbers. In legend the name is at times used to denote a giant, sometimes said to be black-skinned and monstrous-looking. According to legend, they were originally from Africa, being the descendants of Ham, son of Noah.

¹² See Joyce (note 7), 223-73.

¹³ It is to be noted that the wondrous land Diarmaid enters is said to be the *Tír fo Thuinn*, the traditional Land under the Wave (of the sea).

¹⁴ The Dedannans were, according to myth and legend, an early race in Ireland, famed for their skill in magic. By the succeeding (and displacing) Milesians they came to be regarded as supernatural creatures, often identified with faeries. Many of the Celtic divinities were considered to be Dedannans.

¹⁵ Furthermore, Diarmaid's success in reaching the well is made possible by the magic staves of Manannan, one of the most famous Dedannan divinities.

of *The Fate of the Children of Tuireann*, in an episode of which Brian, son of Tuireann, ventures under the sea in much the same fearless heroic fashion as Beowulf, in order to obtain a cooking spit, part of the *eric* fine placed on him and his brothers for the slaying of Kian:

After this poem (by Eithne, daughter of Tuireann) they went forth upon the tempestuous waves of the green sea; and they were a quarter of a year upon that sea, without having gained any intelligence of the island (of Fianchaire).

And then Brian put on his water dress, with his 'transparency of glass' upon his head; and he made a water leap; and it is said that he was for a fortnight walking in the salt water seeking the island of Fianchaire; and he found it at last; and he went to search for its court; and upon his reaching it he found in it but a troop of women engaged at embroidery and bordermaking; and among the other things that they had by them they happened to have the cooking spit. . . .

Brian took leave of them and went forth to seek his ship. And his brothers thought it too long that Brian had been away from them; and just as they proposed to depart, it was then they saw him coming towards them, and that greatly raised their spirits.¹⁶

Similarly, in the references cited by Carney (p. 2) there is no indication of supernatural aid in the subaquatic monster-fights in question; these are, of course, only brief allusions, lacking detail, and, furthermore, mostly of a late date. I think, however, that we can discern a dilution of the tradition of the faeryland under water, in the course of which the motif of survival under-wave is extended and no longer includes the faeryland concept accounting for this survival — the hero simply survives in water. This dilution may have been a result of the encroachment of Christianity on belief in the faery realm. This latter phenomenon must not be overstressed; belief in faeries has exhibited remarkable surviving power through the centuries, even if largely on the level of popular superstition, and (non-allegorical) faery romance survived as a literary form throughout the Middle Ages. Yet the advent of Christianity dealt severe and fundamental blows to genuine belief in 'faeryland the mighty'. Evidence of this extends to Irish legendry, including the tradition in question. On the part of some story-tellers new explanations of underwater survival were obviously called for.

¹⁶ See Joyce (note 7), 87-8.

Witness the story of *The Psalter of the Pig*, in which subaquatic existence is expressly credited to the help of God:

The Cleric permitted the big man to take his son with him to bury him. He consented. 'Why not come with me, o Caenchomrac, to see the monastery?' They went together under the lake into the monastery. Caenchomrac remained in it from one canonical hour till the corresponding one next day performing canonical service and mass. He wondered at the palace and its delightfulness. 'It is so easy for God', said the cleric, 'to cause us to dwell under water as in other places.'¹⁷

Here, then, we see an obvious christianization of the tradition of the faeryland under the waves. Similarly, in the legend of the overflowing of Lough Neagh,¹⁸ Liban is 'protected by God from the water' and survives in a chamber under the lake when the rest of the people drown.

While Beowulf's ability to survive his lengthy stay in water is no more accounted for in rational terms than is Brian's, the idea of divine aid may conceivably have been in the mind of the Christian or semi-Christian poet, or may have been involved in some of the material he used. Let us recall that it is told that at the crucial point of the adventure God protects and aids Beowulf in overcoming Grendel's Mother. Be that as it may, it seems to me a very tempting suggestion that the miraculous descent under water of the mighty Geat, which entirely lacks basic parallels in Germanic myth, is indebted to some stage of the Celtic tradition of the ability of mortals to penetrate and survive under water, traceable, I believe, to the concept of the faeryland under the waves. This would be yet an instance of the influence of Celtic myth scholars such as C. W. von Sydow, Heinz Dehmer, and James Carney have thought to discover in the Anglo-Saxon epic, an influence in the study of which much remains to be done, but which Carney, by his investigation¹⁹ of the connections between the monster lore of *Beowulf* and that of ancient Irish ecclesiastical documents, of the parallels between *Beowulf* and the Irish epic tale of *Tain Bo Fraich*, and of the cultural connections in the eighth century between Ireland and Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, has brought well beyond the stage of mere hypothesis.

¹⁷ *The Psalter of the Pig* — an Irish Legend, *Modern Philology*, XVIII, 451.

¹⁸ See Joyce (note 7), 101.

¹⁹ Carney (see note 5), 76-128.

I do not think it necessary in this connection to take sides between the two schools of opinion on the question of the nature of the undisputed link between the water-adventures of Beowulf and Grettir. If, as the majority of scholars have believed, the waterfall-setting in the Icelandic saga is the primary one, it is not at all strange that, being startling in non-mountainous England, it should have been replaced by a tradition known in the British Isles. If, on the other hand, it is secondary to the setting in *Beowulf*, it is small wonder that in areas altogether foreign to the Celtic tradition in question the offshoot of the latter was altered to coincide with local troll-lore.